

Vicki Freimuth

Tips From The Top

What can you do when faced with a difficult situation and you cannot see your way through? Vicki Freimuth, veteran CDC Associate Director for Communication, knows that the solution to every problem lies within the problem itself.

Being prepared for the unexpected, listening to other points of view, and keeping a positive mental attitude can resolve most workplace obstacles.

“Communication and media relations jobs are, by definition, stressful jobs. We are always working on deadlines. Too often our deadlines are more real and more immediate than other departments of an organization. If you have a reporter on the phone and you’ve got to speak to them immediately about an issue— that’s a real deadline! Not to mention the fact that the product is so highly visible. If you are acting as spokesperson for the agency, you may see your quotes in *The New York Times* tomorrow,” said Freimuth.

Many communication professionals are drawn to health care because they want to contribute in a meaningful way to society and make the world a better place for all individuals. But chronic stress diminishes job satisfaction.

Keeping your cool ‘when all about are losing theirs’ serves as a deterrent to burnout. While one can rarely be 100% prepared for a crisis, predicting in advance what may happen and taking precautionary steps can save valuable time.

Keeping a positive mental attitude can resolve most workplace obstacles.

Freimuth shared with us some good pointers to help make communication jobs less stressful.

Be a team player.

Final decisions on content and communication strategy are often made at the highest levels of an organization. “We can recommend but sometimes we don’t have the final say,” she added. CDC usually works as a team or coalition of partners for media conference planning, with many diverse interests to consider. “The ability to coordinate all the players, reach consensus, and maintain the quality

of the work is important. For example, we had staff meetings twice daily during the height of the anthrax issue.”

Develop Strategies for Staff Turnover.

Staff turnover and absences are disruptive to any office, particularly during a crisis. “The work can’t stop just because someone’s not there or someone has left.”

Freimuth recommends having systems in place so that new people can learn their job quickly. “By establishing some routine procedures for those you work with, you don’t depend totally on any one individual or one set of experiences. That way, if you have a change in staff or someone out sick that day, new people can pick up where the staff left off.”

“New people become more quickly oriented if they’re given the right materials. For example, we assembled binders of information organized with tab dividers. Make sure you establish a good orientation program for new recruits, because a crisis could occur their first week on the job.”

Put It In Writing.

Communication plans can take many different forms. They can be fairly immediate and simple, such as how you’re going to handle an



issue. In media areas, try to develop standard procedures, and put them in writing. For example, write fact sheets, Qs and As, and talking points for an issue well in advance. “If you have it written down, people feel more confident that you have the issue under control.”

“As states are now working to prepare for bioterrorism, given the turnover that we know we have, a lot of these protocols could just get lost unless they are very carefully documented.”

Organize an Emergency Workers’ Schedule.

Make sure that you have sufficient staff and you have people working on a schedule that allows them to perform at a high level.

“During the recent anthrax experience, we created two crisis communication teams. We were staying open seven days a week, 12 or 14-hour days, and you simply can’t expect one person to work that schedule for any length of time. So

we actually went to an emergency workers’ schedule. We formed two duplicate teams of staff and did four days on and three days off—long days, but knowing you had those three days off made it possible to cope with the four days that you were on. Now, we can reconstitute this in a matter of a couple of hours, whereas it took a while the first time around.”

Maintain the Team Roster.

When you build a system, keep it maintained. Routinely check the telephone, cell and pagers numbers listed on this team roster and update it monthly. “It is amazing how stressful it can be if you don’t have those simple tools in place when a crisis hits, because it’s so much harder to build the tools during an emergency.”

Prepare “Go Kits.”

A “go kit” can be simply a big plastic tub that includes equipment like laptops, cell phones, some

basic office supplies and fact sheets. CDC used “go kits” on 9/11 when they evacuated their building and set up an emergency center in a different building. “Having those was a lifesaver. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have had access to the equipment we really needed. Luckily, we don’t have situations like anthrax very often. But we do have public health emergencies with big outbreaks—they may not last as long but they really create a very stressful work environment.”

Hold On to Your Dream.

Some people enter the field of public health communications with undefined expectations. Freimuth advises setting realistic goals that are commensurate with the agency. “My work here at CDC has been personally very satisfying because I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to build something quite tangible and meaningful. That’s what makes the difference.”

Vicki S. Freimuth, Ph.D.

Vicki S. Freimuth, Ph.D., is the Associate Director for Communication at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Freimuth has molded the Office of Communication since its inception in 1996, expanding communication’s role and effectiveness among CDC’s programs and partners. She has firmly established communication as a core part of the agency’s infrastructure and intervention formula.

Under Dr. Freimuth’s stewardship CDC has achieved a network of communication staff throughout the agency, a broad communication training curriculum, market research databases resources to target messages, a communication research agenda and internal research grant program, development of professional and partnership networks and, creative and evaluation contracts.

Dr. Freimuth’s expertise in the field of communication spans 25 years and has resulted in significant contributions to the study and practice of disease prevention and health promotion. She is an internationally recognized leader in health communication.

Formerly she was the Director of Health Communication and Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland, College Park. She taught courses there in health communication, diffusion of innovations, and research methods. Her research focused on the role of

communication in health promotion in the United States and in developing countries.

In addition to contributing to research in health communication, she has made exceptional advances in this field. She developed the first graduate program with a health communication focus in this country, an approach that many universities have since emulated. In 1998 she received the prestigious Outstanding Health Communication Scholar Award from the National and International Communication Associations.

Dr. Freimuth is the author of Searching for Health Information and co-editor of AIDS: A Communication Perspective. Her publications have appeared in “Health Communication Research,” “Journal of Communication,” “American Journal of Public Health,” “Health Education Quarterly,” and “Science Technology and Human Values.” She has been Chair of the Health Communication Division of the International Communication Association and has provided strategic vision on health communication to many private and federal health organizations. She has also been the director of research at Porter Novelli and Associates, a public affairs firm in Washington, D.C. and serves on a number of advisory boards. She has a B.S. with Honors in Education from Eastern Illinois University, a M.A. in Rhetoric and Public Address from the University of Iowa, and a Ph.D. in Communication Theory and Research from Florida State University.